

Obama sharply criticizes ex-pastor as divisive: Statements contradict "everything I'm about"

News in the [June 3, 2008](#) issue

Using some of his strongest language yet about his former pastor, Senator Barack Obama said that Jeremiah Wright's comments capping the clergyman's provocative return to the public stage were "destructive" and contradict "everything that I'm about and who I am."

Obama, who had already distanced himself from Wright in a Philadelphia speech on race early in April, said the minister's remarks at Washington's National Press Club on April 28 had taken the controversy to a new level.

"I am outraged by the comments that were made and saddened over the spectacle that we saw yesterday," Obama said at a news conference in Winston-Salem, North Carolina. "His comments were not only divisive and destructive, but I believe that they end up giving comfort to those who prey on hate, and I believe that they do not portray accurately the perspective of the black church."

In remarks before journalists and ministers, Wright, who retires from Trinity United Church of Christ in Chicago this month, declared that the media focus on his sermons was not an attack on him or Obama but an "attack on the black church."

A day later, the Illinois Democrat and presidential candidate disagreed.

"I did not view the initial round of sound bites that triggered this controversy as an attack on the black church," Obama said. "I viewed it as a simplification of who he was, a caricature of who he was. . . . Yesterday I think he caricatured himself."

Public opinion surveys showed mixed effects on Obama's tight primary battle with New York senator Hillary Rodham Clinton for the Democratic presidential nomination.

Obama said that he was offended by Wright's praise of Nation of Islam founder Louis Farrakhan, who was given an award by a magazine affiliated with Wright's church, "[Wright's remarks] rightly offend all Americans and they should be denounced. And that's what I'm doing very clearly and unequivocally."

Despite Wright's decades of building an "outstanding" church and preaching "wonderful sermons" in the past, Obama said, comments by Wright at the National Press Club were "a bunch of rants that aren't grounded in truth."

Obama agreed with Wright about the nature of their relationship. "He was never my 'spiritual adviser,'" the senator said. "He was never my spiritual mentor. He was my pastor."

Northwestern University also announced its misgivings about Wright, retracting the offer of an honorary degree.

"In light of the controversy around Dr. Wright and to ensure that the celebratory character of commencement not be affected, the university has withdrawn its invitation to Dr. Wright," read a statement from Alan K. Cabbage, Northwestern's vice president for university relations. The offer had been made earlier in the academic year "on the recommendation of faculty committees" to present Wright with an honorary doctorate in sacred theology during Northwestern's June commencement ceremonies in Evanston, Illinois.

In a late April speech in Dallas Wright said of the Northwestern decision, "The president of the university called and told me he was withdrawing the degree because I was not patriotic," reported the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*. A spokesperson for Northwestern said in response, "If Dr. Wright was quoted accurately, that statement is not true." -*Religion News Service*